

Learning & Systems Leadership
Town Hall, Forest Road, Walthamstow, E17 4JF

To all Headteachers, Early Years settings and College Principals

Ask for: David Kilgallon
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Date: 2nd December 2021

Dear Colleague

Waltham Forest latest advice re Covid-19

We thought it would be helpful to confirm our latest local advice around the management of Covid-19 in educational settings.

By way of context, confirmed cases in Waltham Forest, whilst still below the national average, are now rising quite significantly, and have just gone above the London average, with about 1,000 cases a week, over a third of which are among children. Also of relevance to you is the fact that cases locally are far higher in school age children than other age ranges in the community.

Our local guidance as it currently stands is outlined below. We anticipate that things may change rapidly, especially given the emergence of Omicron, the most recent variant. We therefore commit to further urgent communications and hastily arranged briefings as necessary. Please bear with us as we seek to provide timely, meaningful advice.

Face coverings – Department for Education (DfE) guidance states in relation to Secondary Schools “Where pupils in year 7 (which would be children who were aged 11 on 31 August 2021) and above are educated, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by pupils, staff and adult visitors when moving around the premises, outside of classrooms, such as in corridors and communal areas. This is a temporary measure. Pupils in these schools should also wear a face covering when travelling on public transport and dedicated transport to and from school. We do not advise that pupils and staff wear face coverings in classrooms”. We absolutely endorse this advice and with this in mind have made a supply of single use face coverings available to all schools. We will be providing a supply of reusable cloth face coverings to all schools as soon as these are received from our supplier.

In Primary Schools the DfE “recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff and adults (including visitors) when moving around in corridors and communal areas. Health advice continues to be that children in primary schools should not be asked to wear face coverings”. Once again, we fully endorse this advice and would ask school leaders to emphasise the additional control measures that staff in schools should be encouraged to follow – hand washing, effective social distancing, regular testing, maximising ventilation, etc

Other control measures – We recognise that as school leaders you know best what additional control measures are needed. You will obviously weigh these up carefully alongside the need to maintain effective education provision. In Waltham Forest, when

a school meets the DfE outbreak threshold, they will be contacted by the Public Health team and/or the LCRC who will advise on additional control measures, such as enhanced testing, communications with parents/carers, face coverings in classrooms, reintroduction of class bubbles, suspension of assemblies, etc. The recommended control measures may change should the outbreak situation escalate over the following days and weeks. As the number of cases rise, we anticipate that the need for such school specific measures will increase between now and the end of term. We also know that many schools have decided to take similar measures even before formally being advised to do so in an outbreak situation. As a Local Authority we support schools in making these informed school specific decisions. We would always recommend that these are discussed and ratified by your Chair of Governors. We would advise that local control measures should be proportionate, class or year group specific where appropriate, are time limited and reviewed regularly. Officers from Public Health, the Learning Division and Health and Safety are available to offer support and guidance as needed.

We know that there are specifically lots of questions around advice in relation to Christmas activities. We are not currently prescribing that these activities should not go ahead, but that they should be made as safe as possible. Where schools are not intending to cancel or move to virtual activities such as Christmas concerts etc., and where they have not been given specific advice as a result of an ongoing outbreak, the following measures are strongly suggested:

- In line with the Government guidance, requiring mask wearing by all adult visitors to the school.
- Strongly requesting visitors to take an LFD test on the day of the event prior to visiting
- Requiring symptomatic/unwell visitors to avoid attending. This would be for any symptoms, including headache, sore throat, other cold or flu-like symptoms, not just the traditional 3 symptoms of COVID.
- Requiring any visitor sharing a household with a positive case of COVID (during their 10 days of isolation) to avoid attending, even if not legally required to self-isolate.
- Making any indoor spaces as ventilated as possible and asking visitors to dress warmly accordingly.

Preparedness for cases of the Omicron variant – At present, all probable cases of Omicron are being investigated very intensively, and the legal requirements around isolation are greater than the current rules for general COVID. As of today, there have been no Omicron cases with known links to Waltham Forest, but 9 confirmed cases across London, meaning that a Waltham Forest case is quite likely in the next couple of weeks. You should be aware of the following:

- Any contact of a case of probable Omicron COVID is legally required to isolate for 10 days from the point of last contact. This is regardless of age and of vaccination status. Effectively, the isolation rules for Omicron COVID are the same as they were for all COVID back in the first half of the year.
- Where a case of Omicron is believed to be linked to/attended a school, schools will be expected to support the work of LCRC in performing contact tracing; again, similar to the expectations on schools in the first half of the year.

- If there has been significant contact of a case of Omicron at a school, it is possible the school may be asked by the UK Health Security Agency (formerly Public Health England) to facilitate a programme of widespread PCR testing, involving a Mobile Test Unit operating out of school grounds

These measures will likely be in place until the end of term – if cases of Omicron increase significantly, it is unlikely they would be maintained as being a proportional response after the holidays, but there remain significant unknowns.

Should a case of Omicron be linked to your school, we in the local authority will aim to provide as much support as possible around handling the situation, communications, and necessary public health actions, though we would expect the response would be led at London level.

Support for Primary School age children and Early Years settings - We continue to encourage staff, pupils and families to test at home for Covid in light of the rapidly increasing infections. The council's Covid Delivery Team will be writing to Primary School Heads and Early Years settings to outline the support available for schools in the run up to the Christmas break.

Testing on return to school – Staff in all schools should be encouraged to take Lateral Flow Tests (LFT) in advance of returning to school in January. They should also be reminded of the advice that twice weekly testing should be an ongoing control measure.

The Department for Education expectation is that all secondary age pupils are offered a school based LFD alongside the return to school in January. Our reading of the Departmental guidance as currently framed is that Secondary school pupils should undertake one test on-site at the start of term in their schools Asymptomatic Test Site (ATS) followed by one LFD self-test at home 3-4 days after their on-site test. They should then continue to test in line with Government guidelines. We would therefore ask Secondary Headteacher colleagues to contact Wendy Gibbs wendy.gibbs@walthamforest.gov.uk to outline your preferred support for testing of pupils on return. Schools should be reassured that we are prioritising testing capacity to support an effective return to school and that where necessary community testing sites will be transitioned to school testing sites only for the first week of term.

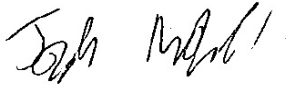
Overseas travel – The guidance has changed and now everyone (including those who are fully vaccinated) must quarantine and take a PCR test before the end of day 2 after they arrive in England (lateral flow tests will not be accepted). This rule applies to adults and to children aged 5 to 17. This means that staff/pupils will generally not be able to return to school/work in the first 3 days after their return to England. There are different rules if you have been in a red list country in the 10 days before you arrive in England: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/red-list-of-countries-and-territories>.

We are not currently providing specific advice around whether foreign travel school trips will be possible or not, but be aware that rules around travel may continue to change at short notice, including rules on whether unvaccinated individuals, including children, will be allowed to travel into countries.

Revised Risk Assessment template – Attached to this letter is advice from Health and Safety colleagues around adjustments to your Risk Assessment in light of the Omicron variant.

In conclusion, thanks you for your ongoing leadership and support, it is greatly appreciated.

Regards



Joe McDonnell
Director of Public Health



David Kilgallon
Director of Learning and Systems Leadership